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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 008011

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SUBJECT: INDIA AND BANGLADESH TRADE SPITBALLS IN INDIAN PRESS

Classified By: PolCouns Geoffrey Pyatt for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary: In the past two weeks, India and Bangladesh have been fighting a war of words in the press over Bangladeshi allegations of Indian involvement in the August 17 blasts and the arrest of five Bangladeshi criminals in Kolkata. At a September 30 press conference, concluding an otherwise constructive Director-General level meeting with the Indian Border Security Force (BSF), Bangladesh Rifles (BDR) DG Choudhury told reporters that "Indian criminals" were responsible for the blasts. On October 6, the "Indian Express" published a story that Kolkata police had arrested five Bangladeshi nationals in connection with the bombing and failed to notify the Bangladesh High Commission. In response, the Indian MEA called Choudhury remarks "baseless and scurrilous," and the Kolkata Special Branch Deputy Commissioner told Consulate personnel that the five men were suspected illegal immigrants, but not terrorists. These incidents reflect the increased levels of mistrust between the neighbors following the August 17 blasts and will pose a challenge to PM Singh's plans to use the November SAARC summit in Dhaka to establish a more cooperative climate. End Summary.

Press Conference Overshadows BSF-BDR Meeting

2. (C) In a press conference covering the biannual September 29-30 Director-General BSF-BDR meetings in New Delhi, BDR Chief Major General Choudhury told reporters that "It is the criminals from India who had crossed over and along with criminals in our own country were responsible for the blasts." BSF Chief Mooshahary denied the accusations, noting that the one person of Indian origin among the 500 arrested after the bombings, named Ghiasuddin, had married and settled in Bangladesh 17 years ago. In a September 30 Press Briefing, MEA said it was "shocked and dismayed" at the "baseless and scurrilous allegations." According to Bangladeshi High Commission (BHC) Political Counselor Mashfe Binte Shams, the GOB also believes "some" of the bombs used in the blasts have Indian markings which indicate origins in Jharkand state.

3. (C) News of the hostile press briefing overshadowed the otherwise constructive BDR-BSF meetings. BHC Shams explained that the DGs agreed on several confidence building measures during the meeting, including expanded coordinated patrolling along the border and a proposal for BDR training at the BSF educational center in Tekanpur. Choudhury and Mooshahary also discussed the GOI request to build fences along the "zero line" in areas where Indian villages are situated on the border. The GOB reaffirmed the 1974 treaty preventing any defensive structures within 150 yards from the border, but agreed to consider specific Indian construction requests. The DGs also agreed on the first ever Indo-Bangla joint "beating retreat" ceremony in Akhaura and Benapole, similar to the ceremony performed at the Wagah Border between India and Pakistan. Shams commented that Choudhury only referred to the role of Indian insurgents in the August 17 blasts in response to the Indian media's "aggressive" questioning. However, she maintained that the press largely exaggerated the statements; Choudhury did not march out of the conference half-way through as some stories reported; instead he went to a cordial lunch with Mooshahary to conclude the day's events.

Bangladeshi Migrants, Not Terrorists, Arrested in Kolkata

4. (U) On October 6, an "Indian Express" story claimed that Kolkata police arrested five Bangladeshis on August 18 in connection to the bombings and failed to tell the Bangladesh High Commission about the arrests. In the report, Shakil Ahmed Biswas, First Secretary of the Bangladesh High Commission complained that the failure to notify "goes against diplomatic norms" and that he would "take it up with the Indian government." The Deputy Commissioner of the Kolkata Special Branch told Consulate personnel that police were on high alert after the nearby blasts, but that there is no evidence the five men are connected with the blasts. He added that they were involved in some kind of trafficking racket, since their documents were faked and they were reportedly promised jobs in Dubai. The Deputy Commissioner explained that the police are not required to notify the Bangladeshi High Commission every time an illegal immigrant

is arrested (apparently a common occurrence), and instead had notified MEA. Anupam Ray, MEA Deputy Secretary for Bangladesh, Sri Lanka and Myanmar, commented that even the press report, which he called "journalistic ruminations," gives no evidence that the arrested men are involved with the blasts. Ray declined to comment on notification to the BHC.

Comment: Mudslinging Reveals Deeper Frustration

15. (C) The GOI is frustrated that Bangladeshi officials continue to make allegations about Indian involvement in the August 17 blasts without credible or compelling evidence. The press conference gave Choudhury a chance to air some dirty laundry, and Bangladeshi diplomats also went straight to the press about the arrests in Kolkata. The Indian press coverage reflects the sentiments of many in India who feel it is unfair for Dhaka to blame Delhi for its own home-grown problems with fundamentalism. The Indian PM's bilateral visit in Dhaka after the SAARC Summit is still on track, but his goal of improving relations will be more difficult in the current blame-game atmosphere. The two sides are at least continuing to talk and move forward on CBMs despite the public rancor.

16. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:
(<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi/>)
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